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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00 INRE-00
CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00
PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 HA-05 MCT-01 SSM-03 IO-13 /070 W
----------104519 141747Z /43
O 141333Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7210
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TELAVIV PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1449

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, PLO, SY,LE, IS
SUBJ: FATAH ATTACK IN ISRAEL

REF: STATE 63427

1. THE SYRIAN CONTINUE TO DOWPLAY THE TERRORIST ATTACK IN ISRAEL WHILE EARNING IN A LONE EDITORIAL MARCH 14 OF POSSIBLE ISRAELI REACTION. THE EDITORIAL CALLS ON THE PALESTINIANS TO BE "CAUTIOUS AND ALERT" AND TO DEEPEN THEIR COORDINATION WITH THE STEADFASTNESS FRONT. BOTH SYRIANS AND PALESTINIANS WE HAVE TALKED TO BELIEVE THAT THE USG CAN CONTROL AND WILL CONTAIN ISRAELI REACTION. (WE HAVE SOUGHT TO DISABUSE THEM, POINTING TO PAST INSTANCES OF ISRAELI RETALIATION, OF NOTION GOI WILL SHARE ITS PLANNING MUCH LESS REFRAIN FROM RETALIATION IF IT DECISES ON THIS COURSE.)

2. SARG HAS TRIED TO MAINTAIN GOOD BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH US, REGARDLESS OF PEACE PROCESS DIFFERENCES, IN PART BECAUSE SYRIA FEELS IT NEEDS US LEVERAGE TO PREVENT
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UNWANTED WAR ARISING FROM ISRAELI ACTIONS OR REACTIONS IN SOUTH LEBANON. SYRIANS ARE PREPARED TO ADMIT THAT THE USG MAY NOT BE ABLE OR WILLING TO PREVENT ANY RESPONSE AT ALL BUT THEY EXPECT US TO ACT AS A BREAK TO PREVENT A SPIRALING OF VIOLENCE TOWARD WAR.

3. SYRIA IS UNPREPARED FOR WAR AND KNOWS ITS COSTS WOULD

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BE STAGGERING IN HUMAN, ECONOMIC, AND POSSIBLE POLITICAL
TERMS. IN VIEW OF THIS, SYRIA WILL LIVE WITH A MASSIVE
ISRAELI RAID OF TEMPORARY DURATION INTO SOUTH LEBANON.
NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE OTHER CONCEIVABLE ISRAELI REACTIONS
WHICH COULD FORCE SYRIAN RESPONSE REGARDLESS OF THE
CONSEQUESNES. WE SHOULD NOT BE UNDER THE ILLUSION
THAT THE VAST DISPARITY OF FORCES IN THE AREA WILL
PRECLUDE OPEN WARFARE. SYRIA CAN BE FORCED TO FIGHT,
PARTICULARLY IF ITS LEADERS FEEL, AS WE THINK THEY DO, THAT
THE GREAT POWERS WOULD INTERVENE TO CURTAIL THE FIGHTING
AND TO PREVENT TOTAL DISASTER FOR SYRIA.

4. WE DON'T KNOW WHERE THE TRIPWIRE LIES BUT A PROLONGED
ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF SOUTH LEBANON WOULD LIKELY STRIKE DAMASCUS
AS UNACCEPTABLE. SYRIA HAS INVESTED A MAJOR EFFORT IN
PROJECTING ITSELF AS PROTECTOR OF THE PALESTINIANS
AND SEES ITSELF AS HAVING DEFENSE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR STATE
OF LEBANON AS WELL. ASSAD WILL, IN THE FIRST
INSTANCE, RELY ON WORDS AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE TO RESTRAIN
THE ISRAELIS. IF THIS FAILS AND HE IS PRESSED, HE MAY BE
FORCED TO GIVE A GREEN LIGHT TO SAIQA OR PALESTINE LIBERATION
ARMY UNTIS TO INTERVENE AS HE HAS DONE IN THE PAST IN LEBANON WHEN
DIRECT SYRIAN INTERVENTION APPEARED TOO RISKY. SINCE ISRAEL
TENDS NOT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN SAIQA AND SYRIAN UNITS,
THE POTENTIAL FOR ESCALATION, UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, WOULD BE
GREAT. ASSAD WILL DO HIS BEST TO STAY OUT OF DIRECT
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FIGHTING. WE HOPE THE ISRAELIS DO
NOT ASSUME WE WILL TOLERATE ANY AND ALL ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION
TO TRY TO DEAL WITH THEIR IMMEDIATE PROBLEM.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS COMMENTS, GOVERNMENT REACTIONS, UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE, TERRORISTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 14 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC01449
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780113-0641
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780373/aaaacjff.tel
Line Count: 98
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 44f3f5c7-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 STATE 63427
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 22 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3344565
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: FATAH ATTACK IN ISRAEL
TAGS: PEPR, PINS, SOPN, SY, LE, IS, PLO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/44f3f5c7-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
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Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014